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ABSTRACT

Paul Zimmer's latest poetry collection, "The Great Bird of Love," is serious and somber, fraught with the burden of evil, the indifference of God, and the certainty of death. The book is not humorless, however, as humor is central to both the chaotic evil and the ordered goodness of human life. It is in this collection that it is possible to see Zimmer's lyric voice and his persona as dual aspects of a single personality. In all sections of the book, the Zimmer-persona poems are interwoven with the lyric-Zimmer poems, revealing the ways the two voices respond to certain events in the poet's life, such as the end of World War II and the deaths of his parents. Readers and students of Zimmer's poetry will become aware that distinctions between "light" and "serious" poetry do not hold, and that absurd, calculated inappropriateness can create humor. In addition, imagery serves a double function as the reader/student can appreciate the inventiveness and wit while being horrified by the deeper reality. The comic is no relief, but is the agent of discomfort--humor and fascination yield to horror. It seems that the characters come to recognize the inclusive and unfathomable magnitude of God, and the dark side of the deity. Where one character puts his trust in God, Zimmer places his trust in love, and dreams of becoming (through the human capacities of love and imagination) a credible redeemer or hero. (PRA)

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Voice and Vision in Paul Zimmer's The Great Bird of Love

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Paul Zimmer has built his reputation on the laughable exploits and pitiable failures of the feckless, self-effacing, hangdog underdog, Zimmer. Yet his latest collection, The Great Bird of Love, published in the National Poetry Series in 1989, is serious and somber, fraught with the burden of evil, the indifference of God, and the certainty of death. This is not to say, however, that the book is humorless; in fact, in this intricately crafted volume humor is central to both the chaotic evil and the ordered goodness of human life. And, characteristically, Zimmer is its central figure.

Several critics have noted Paul Zimmer's development toward a tragic vision which elevates his characters (Zimmer, Rollo, Cecil, Wanda, Lester, Father Animus and others) to mythic proportions. Paul Zimmer reminds us, as have other writers of this century, that it is ordinary human beings, after all, who have the potential for heroism. I am reminded of Willy Loman and of Stevie Smith's assertion that "All human beings should have a medal,/A god cannot carry it, he is not able." (Ellmann and O'Clair, 643) For Merrill Leffler, Paul Zimmer's characters are "the unwilling comedians of loss"; Wanda is the unattainable "idea of perfection" (86, 92). For Rod Jellema, the character Zimmer is a prophet who "has us looking

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into the blinding light of the atomic blast and into the darkness of the human self." ("The Klutz . . .," 77)

It is in The Great Bird of Love more than any other of his collections that we see the poet's lyric voice and his persona as dual aspects of a single personality, for here there are no other speakers; of Zimmer's created characters four besides Zimmer appear in this collection (Rollo, Cecil, Imbellis, and Father Animus appear in three poems which are grouped together), but they do not speak. All of the poems in The Great Bird of Love are spoken by Zimmer or in the lyric voice of the poet. This doubleness has been apparent since very early in Paul Zimmer's career (his persona's name, after all, is Zimmer), and is pointed to directly in the title of a book on his work, Zimmer as Poet, Poet as Zimmer. In The Great Bird of Love this doubleness is central, and although in most of the poems it is apparent which of the two voices is speaking, at times (as in "Missing the Children") the voices merge, making us question our critics' distinction between lyric voice and persona and making us somewhat sheepishly wonder to what extent Zimmer is Zimmer. The opening poem, "The Flowering," speaks of Zimmer's origin:

> How I became Zimmer
> Does not matter now;
> It is an old story of
> Time and hard weather
> Not to be told again. (3)

And the book closes with a desire for further metamorphosis: the speaker (as in the opening poem, a synthesis of the poet speaking in the lyric mode and his created character) wants to become "a great night bird/Called The Zimmer," which, flying above the cruelty, death, and oppression of life, will bring peace and comfort to the people below. (58) In all three sections of the book, the Zimmer-persona poems are interwoven with the lyric-Zimmer poems, revealing the ways the two voices respond to certain events in the poet's life, such as the end of World War II and the deaths of the poet's parents.

One cannot say, as one might expect, that the Zimmer-persona poems are "humorous," whereas the lyric-Zimmer poems are "serious." Although some Zimmer-persona poems are overtly humorous, they point to grimness, futility, and despair ("the skull beneath the wit," according to Paul Zimmer in a 1981 interview with Michael Pettit). Others are deadly serious, but maintain a kind of dark humor in the way language is used. Pettit pointed to this aspect of the persona poems when he noted in his interview, "I think that what is whimsical about your poetry, particularly your use of language, allows you a wider range of feeling and expression than many 'more serious' poets." (52) Also, the tone created by the use of the name Zimmer functions as a kind of parenthesis of humor, whether the actual poem is humorous or not. The tone is similar to that created by a parent naming herself when talking to a toddler: "Now Mommy

will tuck you in." Rod Jellema has noted that Zimmer has "the right name," a name other poets might envy, a name just right for "self-invention." ("An Introduction," 100) Indeed, some Zimmer poems, aside from the associations with the name Zimmer in the title, are not humorous at all.

One pair of poems which vividly illustrates the obscuring of boundaries between lyric voice and persona and the simultaneous use of weighty, serious subject matter and bleak humor in poems of both kinds includes "Zimmer Closes His Family Home" and "The Tenth Circle," which are aptly printed on facing pages. (50, 51) Occurring in the book's third section, which centers around the death of the poet's parents, both poems deal with deep, personal anguish. Yet the character Zimmer, in the first poem, despite his pain, despite his loneliness, remains the pathetic, ineffectual bumbler who even in his adult life touches us through our own childhood humiliations, through the hidden, inadequate selves we spend our whole lives concealing. And the name occurs in the second stanza: "Now Zimmer has no other home/except his own." One might try substituting other names, "Now John has no other home," "Now Smith has no other home," to try to understand the magic of the name Zimmer. Jellema notes the inherent humor in the sound of the name, the "hum and buzz" of it (100), but for the Zimmer devotee there is much more at work-- the associations, indeed, the mythos of Zimmer accounts in large part for placing us immediately in the

world of dark comedy. The seasoned reader of Paul Zimmer's poetry recognizes the characteristic ineptitude of Zimmer as he tries to milk the cold moon for warmth, understands the Zimmerian burden in the "wearisome" realization that "home is not where he goes/But where he comes from." Paul Zimmer makes us aware that distinctions between "light" and "serious" poetry do not hold; such distinctions are usually naive attempts by the compulsive to satisfy their penchant for neat categories.

Facing this poem is "The Tenth Circle," written in the form of a letter to the poet's father, and signed "Love, Paul." Here the poet urges his father to hold out against attempts to place him in a nursing home. There is nothing funny in this situation, and the poet does not make us laugh; yet there is a bleak, backhanded humor which intensifies the horror. "If an ambulance slips up/Quietly to the back door/Do not get on," says the poet, as if the ambulance were a bus or a train, as if the old man would be capable of making such a choice, as if he would have the power. It is the absurd, calculated inappropriateness of this directive which creates humor, and it is our recognition of the contrasting reality, the fact that the old man will be placed in the ambulance without his consent, that he will lack the physical capability to do otherwise, which heightens the horror of his predicament. Imagery, too, serves a double function here, as seen in the following lines:

They mean to
Take you to the tenth circle
Where everyone is turned in
One direction, piled like cordwood
Inside the cranium of Satan
So that only the light of
Television shines in their eyes. (51)

The image here, something midway between Hieronymus Bosch and Stephen King, is richly gothic and perverse: we appreciate the inventiveness, the wit, and while we are enjoying its keenness, we suddenly recognize that the blade is doudle-edged: we are horrified by the deeper reality and by our own indulgence: these are people piled like cordwood, this is the hell of tedium and uniformity, this could happen to any of us. The description of the nursing home as "the place where/They keep the motor idling/On the long black car" works in a similar way; it's funny until you think about it. The comic is no relief; it is, in fact, an agent of our discomfort.

This phenomenon of humor and fascination yielding to horror occurs also in "Zimmer and the Age of Zeppelins," a poem built upon the explosion of the Hindenberg. Zimmer sees the zeppelin "Like a giant okra ponderously/Sliding over trees and rooftops,/Its girders creaking, echoing." The okra comparison is humorous and unexpected, and the tone of the first two stanzas is light and nostalgic, created by a background of ragtime played on a piano, "the sound of

idle laughter," and the "tinkle of/Ice and glasses." However, simultaneously an ominous undercurrent is developing: the "abrupt eclipse" caused by the zeppelin, its creaking girders, the fact that "It took all day to pass over," prepare us for the disaster:

> A sudden astonishing fireball
> And thunder over the horizon,
> The end of the age of zeppelins. (24)

And even in the description of the burning victims, there is fascination in an unexpected comparison: "Bodies dropping like blackened tentworms/From a torched nest." The effect is heightened by the final image of the moon, symbol of the permanence of nature and the cold distance of God, unaffected by suffering and death, "sailing on above the agony" in a mockery of humankind's feeble efforts to transcend earthly existence.

The problem of evil and the nature of God are addressed directly in a sequence of three poems,"Zimmer Sees Imbellis, The Bully, Rise From the Water," "The Origins of Humor," and "Zimmer Remembers Religion." In the first poem, Imbellis, the monstrous incarnation of evil, "Half mortified son-of-a-bitch . . . His eyes streaming like infections," rises from the depths to confront Zimmer. (14-15) Imbellis is a recurring character in Paul Zimmer's poems, and Rod Jellema, in his discussion of the 1983 chapbook Earthbound Zimmer, has noted that Imbellis represents the dark side of the self. ("The Klutz. . ." 77) As Zimmer does battle with

Imbellis, he himself becomes monstrous, bellowing, "feinting and flaring," mumbling threats, "sniffing rags and blood." The battle ends, of course, in a stand-off, leaving good and evil eternally pitted against each other. Despite the heft of its cargo, there is humor in this poem-- in the description of the appearance and behavior of Imbellis ("His spleeny gaze," "his mossy teeth," "He hacked and stewed,/Snapping off awesome obscenities") and in the description of the battle, during which both man and mythic monster behave like mongrels.

In "The Origins of Humor," the setting is once again the lake, where Zimmer, Cecil and Rollo have gone fishing. Imbellis once again rises and displays his intimidating power: "Imbellis harassed us, raising storms/And slashing lightning down upon us,/He rammed the wind into our faces." The three friends sing songs to hide their terror, and when Imbellis surfaces beside their boat, they flatten his head with an oar. It is this act which spawns humor:

> From then on Imbellis has believed
> The world is flat, his only foods
> Have been flounder and skate,
> His brains are like the splatter
> That gulls make on the rocks. (16)

Because Imbellis' head is flattened, his ideas are flattened and his tastes are flattened (he eats only flat fish). The humor created is not pure mirth but ridicule and scatology. Significant also is the

verb tense: Imbellis, though his brains are splattered, is not dead: he continues to live in an altered state, a state which makes him, if not less formidable, at least more endurable. Humor is not seen as "The Answer" to the problem of evil (ridicule, after all, is a weapon); it is rather a defensive device, a coping mechanism.

In the third poem in this sequence, "Zimmer Remembers Religion," Zimmer tells of his rage against the lack of concrete manifestations of God's power. In contrast to the physical incarnation of evil (in the form of Imbellis) and the visible evidence of evil power in the world, evidence of God is, for Zimmer, nonexistent. Zimmer wants "God to come down like an anvil"; he wants "tangible relics--bones, teeth, splinters"; he wants "The sky and sea each day to open and slam shut,/Sun veering, mountains rolling to bury Imbellis." Instead he gets "the mystic drone of Father Animus" and "Self-righteous glad-handing in vestibules." This is a powerful poem of spiritual questioning reminiscent of Hopkins' terrible sonnets. I am reminded particularly of Hopkins' lines "Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must/Disappointment all I endeavor end?" and his despair at finding God remote and untouchable: "my lament/Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent/To dearest him that lives alas! away." (Ellmann and O'Clair, 85-86) Zimmer is equally passionate:

I say

Still that God is in mud and corruption.

He made this world and He is of it all:
Piddle of flies, grit between one's teeth.
He nestles not only in flutings and flower cups.
But he is in scum, envy, dry rot, invective,
He is utmost kindness, yet bewildering neglect. (17)

Both Hopkins and Zimmer ultimately come to recognize the inclusive and unfathomable magnitude of God. Perhaps for Zimmer Imbellis is not the dark side of humankind but the dark side of the deity, the same terrible monster with "darksome devouring eyes" which plagued Hopkins. But whereas Hopkins ultimately places his trust in God, Zimmer throughout this volume abandons the deity and places his trust in love. Although man defiles nature with "the ferocity of bombs," the trees remain true to us: "they love/Us to the end, stroking our bones with root tips,/Topping the markers to purify our graves." (6) In childhood Zimmer took delight in "an outburst of dandelions" which he gathered "To carry home in his lunch pail/As a love gift for his mother." (26) And in the concluding poem, Zimmer yearns to become The Zimmer, "The Great Bird of Love," in contrast to the cold and distant moon (which, significantly, is reflected in streams as a luminous fish).(58) The Zimmer is envisioned as an unwieldy, ponderous and melancholy creature whose physical presence will comfort the people, who live in the shadow of "rising gloom." Zimmer asks, with Hopkins, "Comforter, where, where is your comforting?" (Ellmann and O'Clair, 85) and receiving no

answer, dreams of becoming, through the human capacities of love and imagination, a credible redeemer.

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